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ABSTRACT

One of 52 theoretical papers on school crime and its relation to poverty, this chapter contends that the Appalachian child has a set of values not yet understood by outsiders that influence behavior and lead to misbehavior that is not understood. Greater understanding of Appalachian values would assist observers in understanding that those disruptive acts are usually personal statements of protest and that they could be avoided by a proper respect for the individual's human dignity. Since the Appalachian child's need for belonging is met within the family and/or subculture, the child clings to the values of that culture with such tenacity that rejection by the greater society is sometimes ensured. Proper understanding of the value system could be helpful in assisting the child to function in both societies with less frustration. There is a need for a greater understanding, especially by teachers working with the ever-increasing number of "ghetto hillbillies," of the personal nature of the child's disruptive or criminal behavior if the teachers are ever to break from stereotyped views and ineffective solutions to respond to the needs of an individual child in a society within a society. (Author/MLF)

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CRIME AND DISRUPTION AMONG APPALACHIAN STUDENTS: A PERSONAL RESPONSE

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A paper from
"Theoretical Perspectives on School Crime"

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ABSTRACT

Crime and disruption among Appalachian students are not simple unlawful behaviors arising out of poverty. They are, rather, personal responses to needs or stimuli which may range from a yearning to be touched to a reaction to a false accusation of wrongdoing. The Appalachian child has a set of values not yet understood by outsiders which influence behavior and lead to misbehavior that is not understood. Often, the misbehavior is not clearly related to a specific stimulus, and the crime has no meaning other than a senseless or malicious act. Greater understanding of Appalachian values would assist observers in understanding that those acts are usually personal statements of protest and that they could be avoided by a proper respect for the individual's human dignity. Since the Appalachian child's need for belonging is met within the family and/or subculture, the child clings to the values of that culture with such tenacity that rejection by the greater society is sometimes ensured. Proper understanding of the value system could be helpful in assisting the child to function in both societies with less frustration. Understanding of the Appalachian child's pattern of responses to anger, hurt, and even joy could revolutionize society's attitude to those responses. The violent Appalachian may show more potential as a useful citizen than the one who passively accepts events as they come. It is not unusual for the "troublemaker" who succeeds in shaping his/her own destiny to become highly useful in society as a producer and it is not unusual for the passive child to become no more than a consumer continuing to receive what is given. There is a need for a greater understanding, especially by teachers working with the ever-increasing number of "ghetto hillbillies," of the personal nature of the child's disruptive or criminal behavior if the teachers are ever to break from stereotyped views and ineffective solutions to respond to the needs of an individual child in a society within a society.

A 10th-grade girl handed the principal a quarter at the door. The movie cost only a dime but he had no nickels for change. He gave her two dimes; she gave him a nickel and entered the gym. Later, he called her into his office and asked if she gave him the nickel. She said yes, and he said, "I'm short a nickel. Did you give me the nickel?" She simply stared at him while he demanded that she look him in the face and tell him that she gave him a nickel. After a long silence with the two locked into a mutual stare, she was dismissed. Six days later, strange odors and smoke began to appear in the hallway and lighted cigars were found in 10 lockers.

An 11th-grade boy approached a defaced door, and moments later a teacher rounded the corner. "I knew sooner or later you would do just what your brother did when he was here," she said. She then took him to the principal's office and explained that he had defaced the door. The student was paddled and suspended for three days. Eight days later, the front door of the school was blown off with black powder.

A fourth-grade student was walking behind another girl who fell down. An instant later a teacher appeared

and asked, "Do you want me to whip you or do you want your own teacher to whip you?" The student flippantly replied, "Why don't you both do it?" The teacher did whip the student with a switch. When the student was released, she found the girl who had fallen down and hit her until she cried. After recess, the student's teacher went back to her seat, told her to bend over, and paddled her. When the bell rang for lunch, she found the girl who fell and hit her until she cried. After lunch the principal called the student into his office and spanked her. On the way home on the school bus she looked for the girl who fell but discovered that the girl had decided to walk the three miles to her home.

What these episodes have in common is that a child was falsely accused and responded in what appears to be an extreme and unusual manner. These responses are not extreme or unusual, however, in the culture in which they occurred. Cowardice, to the Appalachian child, is so odious that a child will take punishment for a crime she/he did not commit rather than defend himself/herself verbally and risk having others think she/he is afraid of the punishment. However, unjust punishment must be avenged. The child will not remain passive, though on the surface

she/he appears to, but will avenge the unjust punishment, often in such a way that the vengeance is not necessarily associated with the punishment, but may appear to be malicious, sometimes senseless destruction. Persons unaware of this often view the refusal to offer a defense as a sign of guilt and are simply unable to comprehend the whole series of events stimulated by an accusation or even by simple questioning which may be interpreted as an accusation.

While it would seem logical for the child to defend himself/herself by simply explaining the circumstances and, thus, avoid punishment altogether, the Appalachian child is bound by a cultural code which denies him/her that possibility if she/he is to retain personal dignity as she/he interprets it. The Appalachian child measures himself/herself more against the unique values of his/her subculture than against the more general values of American society. While she/he is sometimes able to compromise his/her behavior enough to function as a social being in the general society, she/he is not able to compromise values regarding personal being without great duress and an almost certain diminishing of self-concept. The crime and/or disruption which results when the child is faced with what is interpreted by that child as a loss of personal dignity or compromise in values are not simple

unlawful behaviors arising out of poverty, but are, rather, personal responses to needs or stimuli. The needs may range from a yearning to be touched to a need for food and the stimuli may range from casual remarks about the family name to false accusations of wrongdoing. Whatever the misbehavior or crime, the answer is almost never as simple as, "I am hungry; therefore, I will steal someone's lunch."

It is not unusual for crime or misbehavior among the poor to be attributed to poverty. However, consideration of the terms the poor and poverty may hold one of the keys to discovering more accurately what lies behind the criminal or disruptive act. It is necessary, first, to realize that the poor implies that poor people can be clumped into a common group. In fact, the label poor may very well be the only commonality among poor people. To look at that one blatantly obvious commonality and refer to it as the causal element in most or even any deviant behavior is a degree of naivete which would not be tolerated in explanations of behavior among most groups. It is essential to look beyond that obvious element to discover the nature of the person who is poor. The nature of the Appalachian person who may, coincidentally,

be poor is different from that of members of other societies and provides a base for different behaviors.

One characteristic of the Appalachian which is often misunderstood, even by Appalachians, is the attitude toward physical touch. In many rather large families, physical touching, especially cuddling, is reserved for the youngest child. All family members cuddle the baby until a new one arrives. At a very early age, the child ceases to receive physical displays of affection and develops the notion that such displays are to be given only to the baby. What was a source of pleasure than becomes regarded with mixed feelings: desire for affectionate touches and fear that such touches are condescending since they are applied usually to "baby" people. It is not unusual for such feelings to lead to disruptive behavior designed to elicit physical interaction even though the interaction will be negative. In one Appalachian school in which students tended to require more and more paddlings as they moved up through the grades, a group of second-graders were asked what it meant when the teacher paddled them. One little girl instantly responded and all of the others agreed, "It means she loves us."

Another little-understood characteristic is reflected by the meaning attached to eye contact. The lowering of the head and looking down which is so often associated with guilt does not have exactly that meaning in Appalachia. Among those people, that particular act usually means "You are an authority figure" or perhaps "You are my elder." However, the Appalachian child outside of Appalachia -- for example, in the "hillbilly ghettos" of Ohio and Michigan -- is often assumed to be admitting guilt when lowering of the eyes (to communicate respect for an authority figure) coupled with lack of a verbal defense (intended to communicate strength of character) actually says to one outside the subculture, "He can't defend himself and he can't look me in the eye because he is guilty." A displaced high school student in a manufacturing city verbalized a typical reaction when she said, "If that's the kind of person she thinks I am, I'll just show her," and proceeded to steal the teacher's purse and throw it into a river. The teacher reading from his/her background what the Appalachian is saying from his/her background, and, thus, making no points of contact in the communication, sometimes

stimulates just such acts, which may then be termed malicious theft. Such theft is in no way related to the fact that the child may be poor but, rather, to the fact that the child feels that his/her personal integrity has been questioned. It is particularly important that this concept be understood since theft is the crime most often explained by references to poverty. A theft by an Appalachian student is more likely to be an attempt to make a statement of protest than an attempt to obtain a possession.

Understanding of the Appalachian value system can lead to the generation of communication and personal growth, rather than mere suppression of misbehavior and crime. Appalachians are not necessarily culturally deprived, as they are often described. Rather, they have a culture that is their own -- different from the mythical middle-America culture. Even in Appalachia, however, teachers often look for specific qualities from the middle-America culture and, upon not finding them, assume that there is a void which should be filled. A frustrating process then begins in which attempts are made to instill in the students the values which are considered proper and to elicit behaviors deemed appropriate by the

general society. This process is often imposed upon the most promising children with the idea that they are diamonds in the rough with great potential which will be released with a degree of polishing. To the great surprise of those who attempt to help these youngsters, these usually highly intelligent students often respond to attempts to help by committing some violent act. For example, when one girl was told by the supervisor that she would sound better if she said "potatoes" more clearly when serving in the cafeteria line, she dumped the contents of a large pan on the supervisor's feet and exclaimed, "Look's like I spilled the taters -- I'm sorry, potatoes." The student interpreted what was probably an altruistic act as a statement that she wouldn't be acceptable until she rejected her own background.

Rather than being empty vessels to be filled, Appalachian children have acquired the aspects of their culture that enable them to survive or operate successfully within that culture. When attempts are made to supplant their culture with another, the students quite naturally resist, for practice of the new culture would lead to their rejection by their own society. Jeers received from acquaintances or strangers who can be avoided

are preferable to jeers from family and neighbors who are always present and will maintain continuous taunting at the slightest hint that one is attempting to escape one's background. Perhaps the best example of such a response was exemplified by a young girl who went away to a northern city and discovered irregular verbs. Sitting among her hold friends at the grocery store, she was asked about the weather up north and replied, "Oh, it just blew and blew and snew and snew," to which a boy across the room responded, "Aw, shat!" The incident brough on such jeers and taunting that the girl subsequently refused to frequent the store even though it was the local gathering place and belonged to her parents. Another student was given an assignment in a home economics course to cook salmon croquettes as a part of a family meal to be prepared at home. Being unusual, the croquettes drew commentary and the family laughingly referred to them as "little turds." In the uproar of laughter, dishes were smashed and the girl vowed never to cook again. At school the next day she argued with the teacher that it was stupid to cook that way and refused to participate in cooking activity again in the class.

Because the Appalachian child's need for belonging is usually met within the family and/or the subculture, it is necessary to discover what behaviors are expected of a person in that family or culture. The behaviors must then be viewed in terms of what they mean in the Appalachian culture and what values they reflect. It is essential to understand that the same behaviors do not reflect the same values in all societies or cultures. Because of the feat of probable rejection by the broader society, the child clings to those values of the sub-culture with a tenacity that often causes rejection to become a certainty. In order to prove that she/he is not denying his/her heritage, and thus losing his/her place as a member of the group, the Appalachian child winds up acting in ways which ensure rejection outside the group. A young women who attempted to change her behavior to meet the requirements of an "outside" husband who viewed her as his Pygmalion became so stressed that she rebelled and assumed the most extreme aspects of her mountain culture. After surviving a divorce and completing requirements for a teaching certificate, she was unable to maintain a position as a teacher because she insisted on saying "you'ns," which she explained was no more incorrect than "you all" or "you guys," neither

of which was rejected as "you'ns" was being rejected.

Another characteristic that often forces rejection when it could have been avoided is the Appalachian disdain for hypocrisy, which could very well be the one unpardonable sin of Appalachia. Hypocrisy is abhorred to the extent that persons in that society will often show their very worst side upon meeting someone in order to demonstrate the fact that they are themselves in all situations.

For people holding this view of hypocrisy, diplomacy is a very difficult skill to acquire for there is such a very fine line between the two. As one boy put it, "I would rather be rude than hypocritical. Because others often interpret this absolute honesty to reflect rudeness or disrespect, Appalachian children frequently find themselves in verbal or physical battles that they do not understand -- they only said what they meant and what was true.

A proper understanding of the values held by Appalachian children could help them to function in both societies with less frustration. For example, sensing that a student was torn between the language of her parents and the language of her school, a teacher discussed language with her in terms of formality and in-

formality. Realizing that the different language at school was not a rejection of her parents, the student was able to employ both languages in their proper settings, moving quite readily from such written sentences at school as "He came every Thursday" to the spoken "He come ever thursdy." The problem in this case, which is a typical problem, is not that the student could not understand the language or learn English but that the student could not write and speak a different language at school until she was certain that she was not rejecting her parents.

Understanding of the Appalachian child's pattern of responses to anger, hurt, and even joy could revolutionize society's attitudes toward those responses. It is customary to punish or at least negatively reinforce violent reactions. However, the child who becomes violent when hurt or angered may have more potential as a useful citizen than the one who slumps into submission and passively accepts events as they come. This concept is demonstrated in the histories of a valedictorian and salutetorian, classmates, of a small Appalachian school. The salutetorian engaged in physical battles every day of her elementary school career. Though she was punished every day, she continued that pattern of violence, which

was her reaction to disparaging remarks about herself and/or her family. She was known as a violent person and even her mother predicted that she would end up in prison. The valedictorian, receiving the same disparaging remarks, dropped his head, looked at the ground, and remained passive. He was known for being able to take things in stride and it was often said of him that he never let things upset him.

In those two histories, violence was punished and passivity was rewarded. The end of the story reveals a key misunderstanding of those two individuals, however. The personal pride which drove one to rage against frustration and the lack of it which allowed one to remain passive were major elements in their styles of survival. By working at assorted jobs and supporting herself through college, the "violent" student became successful in a professional field. The passive one timidly remained in his hometown and worked in a coal mine until it closed, at which time he began to receive welfare checks, which have continued for years with no signs of impending change.

Passivity is rewarded in the schools as "showing proper respect" while children who attempt to shape their

own destinies are often considered troublemakers. It is not unusual, however, for the "troublemaker" to become highly productive in society and it is not unusual for the passive child to become no more than a consumer continuing to receive what is given. Often, when Appalachians reach the point of accepting what is considered a dole, their pride is shattered and they passively accept their worthlessness -- or their pride is injured and they strike back violently. Not realizing the strength of individual pride in the Appalachian, it is difficult for the kind-hearted outsider to understand why his car window was broken while he was leaving a Christmas basket of fruit on a doorstep.

Great strides could be made in equipping these children to function in society if their teachers would realize that violence and passivity in the Appalachian child are not necessarily character traits to be rewarded or punished, but responses to significant events. Rather than rewarding passivity or punishing violence, the problem is to enhance self-concept and to teach varied problem-solving methods. With physical punishment in the home and paddling in the school, the child may not have any model for problem-solving other than violence and,

understandably, attempts to solve personal problems of frustration through violence. Passivity and violence should be viewed as indicators of problems -- not as problems themselves. It is when teachers operate with that approach that personal growth and not merely suppression of crime and misbehavior will occur.

Teachers in Appalachian schools could assist the children in developing skills necessary for functioning in both the general society and the Appalachian society through awareness and appreciation of the students' unique values. Acceptance of the children's values as valid could provide the foundation for mutual respect, which could enable the children to accept suggestions of alternate behaviors for various situations. Such an approach would lead to less personal conflict due to fear of rejecting and being rejected by their own society. Without the need to fight to keep their heritage, involvement in crime and disruption as a protest would diminish.

Even more important than understanding and acceptance of the validity of the Appalachian child's culture by the teacher in Appalachia is the understanding and acceptance of that culture by teachers in manufacturing cities and commercial farm areas where Appalachians have migrated

and formed "hillbilly ghettos." The potential for crime and disruption is greater among those displaced Appalachians because of their constant awareness that they are a small island within a larger society. Because of the proximity of the two societies, the need for defending one's position is much greater and crimes against people and property occur more often.

The problem of the "ghetto hillbilly," who generally lives in an area segregated from the greater society, is compounded in the school. There, she/he is very quickly recognized as different, but the nature of the difference is not understood. Because of the lack of communication between teacher and pupil, immediate disruption often occurs but, more important, learning is impeded, creating a climate for future disruption. When these children fail to learn what is routine for their age, they are labeled slow and unfortunately, may be largely ignored. As a result, their self-esteem diminishes and, concurrently, their involvement in crime and disruption may increase.

Since crime and disruption in the Appalachian school and crime and disruption among displaced Appalachian children in ghetto schools are often erroneously attributed to poverty, their cause is usually not dealt with adequately. Unacceptable behavior among Appalachians is

much more complex and is a basic method for making personal responses to needs and stimuli. There is a need for greater understanding, especially by teachers working with the ever-increasing number of "ghetto hillbillies," of the personal nature of the child's disruptive or criminal behavior if the teachers are ever to break away from stereotyped views and ineffective solutions and respond to the needs of an individual child in a society within a society.